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Four Letters to 'The Times'

ON

FAMINE FEVER AND PUBLIC CHARITIES

BY

SIR CHARLES TREVELYAN, K.C.B.

DECEMBER AND JANUARY 1873

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FAMINE FEVER AND PUBLIC CHARITIES.

I.

THE reappearance of famine fever in London at this period of general prosperity is a phenomenon which may well excite surprise. ‘Famine fever is caused by destitution,’ but how is the destitution to be accounted for at a time when wages are at the highest, and our great national industries are languishing for want of labour? The real character of the disease has yet to be ascertained. What, then, is the diagnosis?

The most unsettled and questionable part of the population of these islands and of the neighbouring countries have for centuries poured into this great metropolis. And what are the influences they are here subjected to? For them the law of our nature, which is the foundation of all physical as well as moral well being, that we should earn our bread by the sweat of our brow, is practically suspended. To use the words of a recent remarkable report:—

‘Night refuges and free dormitories to which all comers are admitted with hardly any check, public soup kitchens, innumerable doles of bread, groceries,

coal, &c., and a vast system of authorized mendicancy, by which crossing-sweepers, sellers of matches and other articles, street singers, &c., subsist upon alms under pretence of service, are among the means by which a large vagrant and mendicant population are enabled to live in London without regular or productive labour.’*

Our lower London population has lost, not only the habit, but the very idea of independent self-support, as well as of the thrift, self-denial, and provision for the future, necessary to maintain it. This is the bitter root of the evils from which we are suffering.

The proportion which the places for the sale of intoxicating liquors in London bear to the population is exceptionally large ; but how can it be otherwise when workmen in the receipt of good wages, relying upon out-door relief and indiscriminate charity, as a ready-made insurance, think they have done the right thing when they allow their wives and children a few shillings a week, and spend the rest in self-indulgence ? The prevailing habit of deserting wife and children, when they begin to be burdensome, is directly traceable to the same cause. Far the best way of providing for a child is to turn him into the streets, for then he is certain to be well educated, and put out in life, through some industrial school or orphanage. Instead of encouraging wives to make their homes pleasant to their husbands, we encourage

* Special Committee on Vagrancy and Mendicity formed by the Council of the Charity Organisation Society.

the husbands to spend their leisure hours at clubs. In short, we do all we can to break down family life, the result of which may be seen in the habitual neglect of wife and children, culminating in the wife murders, by beating and kicking, which are the disgrace of our generation.

An extraordinary number of widows and deserted wives, with their children, the *débris* of this mixed multitude, have so overstocked the market for washing, charring, common sewing, and other inferior kinds of labour in London, that it is impossible for them to maintain themselves by honest industry, even if they desired to do so. The widows, therefore, 'put on the cap' (which, like the gown and badge of the King's bedesmen, is regarded as a licence to beg), demand the 'widow's half-crown' from the out-door relief, and go the round of the charities, getting a soup or dinner ticket here, a bread or grocery ticket there, and doles from district visitors of different religious persuasions, with all of whom they pretend to agree; and their children are thus trained, as in a school, to replenish the ranks of pauperism. Then, there is the absence of all proper sanitary conditions—overcrowding, dirt, and want of ventilation—but, like the excessive number of public-houses, overcrowding was an effect of an anterior cause before it became an aggravating influence. How is it possible that people with the habits of our lower London population can either appreciate proper house accommodation or pay for it? Even if it could be provided for them on a large scale on the eleemosynary prin-

ciple, it would do them no good. One model lodging-house has been so appropriated, with the result that it has become a pauper warren.*

But, as the doctors say that famine fever is owing to the want of adequate nourishment, most charitable people, not caring to follow the process of reasoning beyond the first step, will only supply additional nourishment in all the various forms of soup-kitchens, dinner tables, doles of bread, groceries, &c. Thus we are moving in a vicious circle. Increased destitution provokes more abundant relief, and more abundant relief encourages those habits which lead to a further aggravation of the destitution, and so on. There has been nothing like it since that dependent population of old Rome which lived by the gratuitous distribution of public corn, and, although Julius and Augustus Cæsar endeavoured to keep it within manageable limits, powerfully contributed at last to the fall of the Empire. There is only this difference, that then it was *panis et circenses*, bread and the excitement of public games; whereas now, it is bread and the excitement of a sickly, sensational, and too often hypocritical, kind of religion.

Our object, therefore, ought to be permanently to improve the condition of the poor; to restore them, as far as possible, to self-respect and self-support; and to give such certain and regulated assistance to the infirm and old that they may not be under the necessity of leading a mendicant life. With this end in view, we must not confine ourselves to the treat-

* Gatliff Buildings, Commercial Road, Pimlico.

ment of symptoms. Instead of merely pumping the water out of the sinking ship, we must try to stop the leak. Instead of merely burning the weeds, we must clean the ground to prevent their growing at all. If we would elevate the condition of the poor, we must operate upon all the causes which have depressed that condition, and apply alteratives tending permanently to amend it. Should you do me the honour of publishing this, I will consider in a future letter what those alteratives ought to be.

LONDON: Dec. 27.

II.

ALTHOUGH soup-kitchens are a rough and ready mode of preserving life in a time of general calamity, they are in the highest degree objectionable as a permanent means of relief, because they only admit of wholesale operations, and when the food has once been cooked it must either be eaten or thrown away. After the Irish famine soup-kitchens gave place to indoor relief, and Ireland has been depauperised to a degree which puts England and Scotland to shame ; but, having been introduced into London at the same period of dearth, they not only struck root in our congenial soil, but also threw out branches, under various names, which together constitute a vast machinery for feeding young and old on purely eleemosynary principles. If the artist of the *Graphic* wants models of the villainous burglarious type, he will find them by the score in the crowd which daily awaits the distribution of three great chaldrons of

thick soup in a court near Leicester-square. If he wishes to see to what a depth of degradation human beings can be reduced by idleness, hypocrisy, and vice, he should visit the Parker-street and other 'Missions,' where the rule is to get a full meal before being called upon to sing a hymn and join in prayer.*

Some years ago public sympathy was excited by the spectacle of poor persons exposed at night at the doors of the workhouses, and night refuges were therefore erected in various parts of London by public subscription. Meanwhile the two Houseless Poor Acts were passed, under which casual wards were established in connection with the London workhouses, and the voluntary night refuges, which, without previous thorough investigation as to the applicants' recent modes of obtaining a livelihood, admit houseless persons to lodging and food, then became 'most mischievous, as tending to promote vagrancy and to obstruct those measures for its repression which have been devised by the Poor Law.'† Fearing that when the Red Indians ceased to be formidable, they would degenerate into a vagrant Gipsy class, living by begging and stealing, the Government of the United States has determined that they shall be 'brought distinctly to the realisation of the law

* 'Report upon the Metropolitan Charities known as Soup-kitchens and Dinner-tables; with a digest of reports, and a list arranged according to Poor-law divisions, by the Council of the Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity.' Longmans, and at the office of the Society, 15 Buckingham Street, Strand. Price 1s.

† Special Committee on Vagrancy and Mendicity.

that if they would eat they must also work. Nor should it be left to their own choice how miserably they will live in order that they may escape work as much as possible. The Government should extend over them a rigid reformatory discipline, to save them from falling hopelessly into the condition of pauperism and petty crime. Merely to disarm the savages, and to surround them by forces which it is hopeless in them to resist, without exercising over them for a series of years a system of paternal control, requiring them to learn and practise the arts of industry at least until one generation has been fairly started on a course of self-improvement, is to make it pretty much a matter of certainty that by far the larger part of the now roving Indians will become simply vagabonds in the midst of civilisation.* Our Red Indians are entirely of our own creating. Our large predatory class, whose most innocent occupation is begging, go the round of the soup-kitchens, night refuges, and casual wards, and are always at their places at the 'breakfast services' on Sunday. The Act recently passed for the inspection of vagrants in the casual wards is baffled by the vast annex which has been provided by ignorant benevolence.†

The street-crossings of London form, in the aggregate, a university of idleness and mendicity, the mischievous influence of which is increased by the

* Report of the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1871-2.

† Conference on Night Refuges, held at the Rooms of the Society for Organising Charity and Repressing Mendicity, and Report of the Committee appointed at the Conference.

fact that, in certain states of the weather, a slight service is really performed. There is, therefore, always a pretext for begging, and it is difficult entirely to refrain from giving. Women, children, and able-bodied men are thus tempted to adopt a lazy, shifty life, dependent upon precarious alms. Another reserve of this great army of beggars is protected by the pretence of selling matches and other trifling articles.

If we would rescue our people from this dreadful curse of pauperism, an end must be put to soup-kitchens, night refuges, and street begging; and the administration of relief must be confined to those organisations which proceed upon the principle of previous investigation and mutual concert. The Elberfeldt system of voluntary visitors, taken alone, is too nebulous to make much impression; but, backed by the infirmary for the sick, the asylum for the aged, and the workhouse for the idle, of our Poor Law system, it is equal to every exigency.

This metropolis, with its population of 3,500,000, has now been formed into one great charitable association, combining the principle of centralisation with that of local administration, so as to allow of the full investigation of every claim, and to check the prevailing practice of going about begging from charity to charity, and from charitable person to charitable person—in other words, to check the monstrous prevailing evil of professional mendicancy, and to arrange, by mutual concert, for the effectual relief of all deserving cases. More than this, the Charity

Organisation Society has joined hands with the clergy of every persuasion to establish committees for the purpose of co-operating with the district visitors within the manageable area of each ecclesiastical parish. The model up to which we are working is that charity, administered upon wise, discriminating, salutary principles, should take entire charge of cases of temporary distress, as well as of those deserving aged and infirm persons who, with some help from their own means or from relations or friends, can maintain a home of their own ; while in-door relief should be for the unworthy, and for those perfectly helpless and friendless persons who cannot with any advantage have a home to themselves. Sufficient progress has been made to show that we are building on true lines, and that all that is wanted to complete the edifice is more support in men and money, but especially in men. The street-crossing and match-selling school of mendicancy must be left to the vestries and the police. The present state of the London foot-pavements and crossings would disgrace a fifth-rate country town ; but as the vestries have ample scavengering establishments for cleansing the roadways, which are used by horses, they will, perhaps, after another generation or two, tell off a few scavengers for the foot-pavements and crossings, which are the especial resort of human beings. I must crave room for one more letter to finish the subject, after which I shall cease to presume upon the patience of the public.

III.

NEXT to food, clothing, and lodging, the greatest want of modern civilised life, and especially of family life, is medical treatment, which is provided in London for the entire working class on a purely gratuitous, eleemosynary, footing, through the out-patient departments of the hospitals, and the free dispensaries. The body of our people are thus educated to dependent, mendicant habits, and instances frequently occur of the corruption extending to the middle class. The out-patient departments are so crowded that it is impossible to give to serious cases the attention they require, and those for whom the charity is really intended waste their strength in unavailing attendance. The medical profession is to a great extent unpaid, and, in the absence of a legitimate career, special hospitals have been established much beyond the real occasion for them, which compete with, and weaken, the general hospitals. The burden of providing gratuitous medical relief for the bulk of our metropolitan population is, however, beyond the power even of London charity, and the public ear is constantly harassed with lamentable appeals of empty beds and bankrupt exchequers. All this would be remedied if the free dispensaries were converted into provident dispensaries, and a small countervailing payment were required at the out-patient departments of the hospitals from those who were not able to prove their inability. In many of

our midland and northern towns a highly satisfactory relation has thus been established between the working class and the medical profession. The sums divisible among the medical officers afford them a handsome remuneration, and, instead of the imperfect measure of relief obtained under the gratuitous system, husbands and fathers secure, without asking a favour of anybody, the salutary visits of medical friends and advisers to their own homes under all the exigencies of family life. The power of the purse is the ultimate tribunal in this as in other things, and if those who desire a change make their future contributions conditional upon practical effect being given to it, the improvement cannot be long postponed.*

The voting charities, also, have propagated mendicant habits among all ranks of society. That their benefits are not for the friendless and helpless, but for those who have the most numerous, influential, and wealthy supporters, and that unhappy creatures afflicted with incurable complaints are tempted to undergo the harassment and wear and tear of canvassing for an indefinite number of half-yearly elections in order that the 'charity' may be well advertised, and replenished with subscriptions at the rate of ten shillings a vote, is really the

* See on this branch of the subject:—'First Report of the Medical Committee of the Charity Organisation Society, with Rules for Provident Dispensaries, and Report of a Conference held at the Society of Arts in December 1871;' and 'Letter to the Governors and other Subscribers to St. George's Hospital by Mr. T. J. Phillips Jodrell.' Copies may be obtained at the office of the Charity Organisation Society, No. 15 Buckingham Street, Adelphi.

smallest part of the evil. Instead of themselves providing for those who have claims upon them, families in good position now pester all the world with their solicitations. Of the poor candidates not one in twenty has a chance of success, candidature being, for the most part, merely a protected, privileged mode of begging, under cover of asking for money to buy votes and to pay the expense of subsistence, postage, and locomotion while canvassing. Worst of all, there is a parasitic growth, which some of the more respectable of these societies have in vain endeavoured to eradicate, of persons who, professing to promote the election of candidates, issue the most touching appeals to the subscribers, and misappropriate to their own use what they get either in money or votes, for the votes can always be sold for something less than the regulation price at which they are issued from the office of the society. 'Those engaged in these practices work upon a regularly organized system, having many addresses and various names.'* But although it has been proved, by a reference to the whole body of the subscribers to the Incurable Hospital, that there is a prevailing feeling in favour of substituting investigation for canvassing, there will never be wanting a well-disciplined local majority to 're-elect the officers' and maintain the existing system against all comers. It is the misfortune of these great institutions that, although the scattered units which compose their constituencies are dignified by the name of 'Governors,'

* Notice issued by the Managers of the British Home for Incurables cautioning subscribers against swindling canvassers.

their administration is really vested in a compact knot of persons residing in or near London, supported by the wire-pullers who manage the elections, and forming in many cases almost an hereditary connexion. Here also the only possible remedy is the power of the purse. Those who think that a change is called for should annex that condition to their contributions.*

It was exquisitely painful, in going through the cases of many hundred persons in the receipt of relief from various quarters, to observe the pittances earned by women and children, and their miserably underfed condition, the result of which appears under various forms of delicacy, rickets, and a general low state of vitality. What they want is regular employment and sufficient food, far more than medical relief. This is the residuum of the great multitude which has been attracted by the chaotic state of public and private charity. London is the paradise of idlers, and the weaker members are left to shift for themselves. This will be remedied by degrees as relief becomes organised and based upon previous investigation, but meanwhile the evil is aggravated by an unfortunate habit of our charitable ladies. As soon as a woman has lost her husband or been deserted by him, they complete the disruption of the

* In reference to this part of the subject see 'Proceedings of the Council of the Charity Organisation Society on the system of Periodical Contested Elections by the Whole Body of the Subscribers, in its application to Hospitals and Dispensaries;' and 'Report of the Committee for ascertaining the wishes of the Subscribers to the Royal Hospital for Incurables as to the mode of selecting the Patients.' Copies may be obtained at the offices of the Charity Organisation Society.

family by sending the girls into orphanages and the boys into industrial schools, the woman herself being generally supported by out-door relief and grocery tickets. In its actual results this is worse than the desertion by the husband, who is often a good riddance; and it is difficult to see what is to be the end of the present rage for mewing up such a large proportion of our juvenile population in vast institutions. The disposition to pond up boy labour in the streets of London is also most unfortunate, for, although blacking shoes or sweeping crossings is better than thieving, it is at best a lazy, shifty, mendicant sort of life, leading to nothing really useful or self-supporting.*

* God forbid that I should 'despise the day of small things' when Lord Shaftesbury and John MacGregor gathered the first-fruits of our *proletaire* harvest and garnered them in comparative safety. Neither do I deny that 'in such a mixed population as ours there must be a variety of employments of various degrees of excellence down to those which pure political economy might consider very inferior and even objectionable.' But what I am prepared to maintain is, that, having now arrived at an advanced stage of the undertaking, we ought to review our proceedings, and modify our plan according to the means and opportunities now open to us. In an able article in the *Reformatory and Refuge Journal* for January 1872, Mr. W. E. Hubbard, junior, observed, 'It cannot be too emphatically asserted that any kind of street occupation should only be temporary, a stepping-stone from the slough of idle destitution to the firm ground of honest industry. Street work is essentially bad, for it involves a great amount of idleness, and of itself leads to nothing better.' This cannot, I am afraid, be much improved; but, on the other hand, what a prospect of advantage, both to the young people themselves and to the country at large, has been opened by the fact that our great national industries are languishing for want of labour, and could absorb almost any quantity.

Employment is scant in London because it is not a manufacturing place, but a place for the residence of private families, and of those who minister to their wants. Our lives of industry are in the centre and north of England. The labour of women and children, which is unremunerative here, is exactly what is wanted there. The contrast between the single crowded room and the pauper precarious life of London, and the four-roomed house with gas and water laid on, and the aggregate earnings of 30s. or 40s. a week, or more, of the West Riding and Lancashire, is a marvellous social phenomenon. Our London boys are appreciated there for their versatility and intelligence, and, with good food and regular work, they can be trained in a few years into first-class mechanics, able to earn their fifty shillings a week in any part of the world. This is a blessed change both for those who go and those who stay, for not only will the rate of wages rise as these large families are eliminated, but a spirit of industry and self-respect will be promoted by the example of successful enterprise, and a check will be put to the disintegration of the domestic relation which is now in rapid progress.*

To depauperise London and improve the habits of its lower population, upon which everything else depends, is a work comprising many different opera-

* 'Employment in the Country for Poor London Families, especially Widows with Children.' Copies of this manual can be obtained at the office of the St. George's (Hanover Square) Committee of the Charity Organisation Society, 28 Mount Street, Grosvenor Square.

tions, and requiring the cordial co-operation of every class of people. It involves the solution of social and administrative problems worthy of the profoundest statesman and the most practical man of business. More than half must be done by the ladies, who, whatever may be thought of the claims lately put forward on their behalf, are excellent in their own old proper work of charity. Last, not least, the working men must come to the aid of their own class, and of the idle, helpless class below them. The practical knowledge and influence of intelligent, public-spirited working men would be beyond all price. If all this, or nearly all this, were done, we should hear no more of Famine Fever.

LONDON : *January 4.*

IV.

The view taken by Dr. Octavius Sturges was strongly maintained rather more than a year ago at the Conference on Out-Patient Hospital Relief, presided over by Mr. W. H. Smith, and attended by Mr. Stansfeld, Dr. Acland, Mr. Fairlie Clarke, Dr. Rogers, Mr. Gurney Hoare, the Rev. J. F. Kitto, and many others whose opinions on the subject are entitled to weight. On that occasion I remarked:—

‘It is a mistake to suppose that the class of *malades imaginaires* is only to be found among the rich. For one fine lady who pays her two or three guineas a week for the luxury of frequent conferences with her physician, hundreds of poor women are tempted by our medical charities to live upon drugs, tonics, and

cordials, to the neglect of the real sources of health—regular employment, good food, cleanliness, and roomy, well-ventilated dwellings. Clergymen and district-visitors, in their visits to the poor, constantly see rows of phials, obtained some from one and some from another hospital or dispensary, which are appealed to as evidence of a low state of health. “My doctor,” they say, “bids me do this or that.” Thus the abuse of medical relief works in with the abuse of other kinds of relief. But this whole system is breaking down by its own weight. With two or three exceptions, the hospitals are all out at elbows. They are spending more than they get, and are constantly making lamentable appeals to be rescued from bankruptcy. How can it be otherwise? The burden to be borne is nothing short of the medical treatment of the entire community, with the exception of a narrow upper margin. The great bulk of the community, who lie between those who pay the ordinary fees and those who can pay nothing at all, including the entire working class, are not only exempted from contribution, but matters are so arranged that they would find it difficult to contribute even if they wished to do so. However practicable it may have been in former times, such a medical system is totally unsuited to the present vast population of London.’

Dr. Meadows, who followed me, observed:—

‘It was unquestionably the fact that the poor were now being gradually ousted out of the consulting-room by well-to-do persons : and he knew, as a fact, that persons in the possession of incomes of £1,000

a year came as out-patients to receive advice, and that the wives and daughters of men almost as wealthy actually borrowed their servants' clothes in order to apply as out-door patients. That was an injustice upon the public, and not less so upon the medical profession, because, in fact, thousands and thousands of pounds were taken annually out of the pockets of practitioners, who were expected to give up hours every day in gratuitously advising persons who were perfectly well able to pay the usual fees. The profession was perfectly convinced of the evils of the present system, and it hoped that the public generally would take the question up with the earnestness that it deserved.'

The resolutions come to by the Conference were:—

First, 'That this Conference is of opinion that there exists a great and increasing abuse of out-door relief at the various hospitals and dispensaries of the metropolis, which urgently requires a remedy;' and second, 'That in the opinion of this Conference, the evils inseparable from the system of gratuitous medical relief administered at the out-door departments of hospitals and in free dispensaries, can be in a great measure met by the establishment, on a large scale, of provident dispensaries, not only in the metropolis, but throughout the kingdom, and by improved administration of Poor Law medical relief.'

Since that some progress has been made in establishing provident dispensaries, but the development of the system is effectually checked by the gratuitous advice and medicine given to all comers at the out-

patient departments of the hospitals. The remedy for this is a moderate countervailing charge to be paid by everybody who cannot produce *primâ facie* evidence of inability.* The point is of vital importance, for there is absolutely no hope of being able to promote self-respecting, self-supporting habits among our lower London population while they are educated to mendicancy and pauperism by wholesale gratuitous medical relief. Therefore, with Dr. Meadows, I trust that the public generally, and especially the subscribers to the hospitals, with whom the decision really rests, will 'take the question up with the earnestness it deserves.'

LONDON: Jan. 10.

* The following explanations have since been furnished in a letter published in the *Lancet* of January 18:—

'OUT-PATIENT DEPARTMENTS AND PROVIDENT DISPENSARIES.

'To the Editor of THE LANCET.

'SIR,—While admitting the necessity for a reform of the out-patient departments of the hospitals, you remark that the arrangements actually proposed would merely transfer the feeling of dependence from the paupers to the medical officers; but I am persuaded that if those arrangements were properly understood, no such objection would be entertained. At present, whether at hospitals or dispensaries, everybody is exempt from payment. It is proposed that this should be reversed, and that all should pay who are not entirely destitute. The motive to have recourse to the reserves of medical and surgical skill at the hospitals would, therefore, be as strong as ever. Nay, the dis-

position to resort to them on the part of the class of cases best suited for hospital practice would be increased, for, while the trivial cases which crowd the out-patient departments would be sifted off to the provident dispensaries; persons who now refrain from going to the hospitals because the treatment is purely eleemosynary, or who go under some pretence or disguise, would openly apply if a moderate payment had to be made.

‘The patients who pay a small sum for attendance at provident dispensaries are more considerate and grateful than those who frequent free medical charities, the prevailing feeling of these last being that they are only claiming a right. This accords with general experience. What is earned and paid for is always more highly valued than what is received as a free gift. No commercial relation exists between the medical man and the patient, such as can in any way hamper the action of the former. The payments are made to the secretary, the doctor having merely to receive a cheque once a quarter, or once a half-year, from the secretary.

‘Although the hospitals furnish plenty of interesting and difficult cases, they are deficient in examples of the everyday class of domestic complaints—measles, whooping-cough, teething, and the all-important category of midwifery cases, which form so large a part of the business of medical men. All this would be supplied if students were required, as part of their course, to take a turn at one of the dispensaries of the district, and to accompany the medical officers in their visits to the sick. If medical students had such practice as this, instead of the attendance at a limited number of midwifery cases now required, they would soon become accomplished accoucheurs.

‘But the aspect of the subject which seems to me most full of hope is that, instead of the sick being collected in masses in the waiting-rooms of the hospitals and dispensaries, they will, to any necessary extent, be visited in their own homes by intelligent, benevolent, medical men, who, being thus brought into personal contact with the sources of disease, will see at a glance what has to be set right. The ladies, upon whom the burden at present falls in their capacity of district visitors, would welcome such a

reinforcement, for, although otherwise well qualified to be the friends and advisers of the poor, they have not studied sanitary science; neither can they make their voices heard in public as men can. This would be the best move yet made towards the improvement of the dwellings of the poor.

‘I am, Sir, yours, &c.

‘C. E. TRÉVELYAN.

‘LONDON, *January 12th*, 1873.’



LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

